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The Competence-Performance Gap in Academic Email Requests: Evidence from Algerian Doctoral Students

الفجوة بين الكفاءة والأداء في طلبات البريد الإلكتروني الأكاديمية: أدلة مستمدة من طلاب الدكتوراه الجزائريين

Amina Naceur[1]
أمينة ناصر
ADDLC laboratory, Mohamed Lamine Dabaghine Setif 2 University, Algeria
am.naceur@univ-setif2.dz

Dr. Samra Choubane
د. سمراء شوبان
ADDLC laboratory, Mohamed Lamine Dabaghine Setif2 University, Algeria
s.choubane@univ-setif2.dz

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic competence of second-year doctoral students at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University - Sétif 2, Algeria, focusing on the realization of request strategies in academic emails. Using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework, the research compares 43 authentic emails sent to faculty with 30 responses from a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). Quantitative analysis revealed an overwhelming reliance on direct request strategies, which accounted for 95.3% of the 43 authentic requests and 86.7% of the 30 WDCT requests. A significant "directness paradox" emerged: students exhibited higher levels of directness in authentic communication than in controlled tasks. Furthermore, WDCT responses contained significantly more internal and external modification devices than real emails. These findings suggest a noticeable competence–performance gap, where advanced EFL learners possess declarative knowledge of pragmatic norms but struggle to apply them under the cognitive and contextual pressures of real-time communication. The results challenge the validity of relying only on elicited data and underscore the need for pedagogical interventions that prioritize the automatization of pragmatic routines. This research offers critical insights for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction, advocating high-volume, time-pressured practice to bridge the disconnect between learners' pragmatic awareness and their procedural ability in high-stakes academic environments.

Introduction

With the digital revolution of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, communication practices shifted decisively to another dimension. The digital communication mode has been adopted across diverse sectors, and education is no exception. Within the educational sphere, and especially in higher education, email has become the main way to communicate in academic settings. It serves as an important channel for interaction between students and faculty in higher education institutions worldwide (Chen, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). For doctoral students, writing appropriate email requests to faculty members is crucial for their academic socialization and professional growth. However, research shows that non-native English speakers struggle to write emails that meet the norms of the target language (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). This difficulty of writing a professional email often leads to misunderstandings and can harm academic relationships. Making requests is inherently challenging (Brown &

1 Corresponding author

Levinson, 1987). It requires speakers to balance efficiency with politeness while considering social factors like distance, power dynamics, and the level of imposition. In English-speaking academic contexts, crafting proper requests needs not just language skills but also an understanding of how language choices show respect, lessen the sense of imposition, and navigate institutional hierarchies. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, these demands increase due to potential influences from their first language, limited exposure to the norms of the target language, and a lack of clear instruction in email writing (Chen, 2015). Research on email practices among Arab EFL learners reveals consistent patterns of divergence from native speaker norms. Studies indicate that Arab students often use more direct request strategies (Deveci & Hmida, 2017), frequently overuse formulaic polite terms such as "please" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), have a limited repertoire of linguistic modification tools (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), and show incomplete email structures (Deveci, 2023). However, most of the previous studies focused on undergraduates or used controlled elicitation methods like Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). Research shows comparatively little data on the pragmatic performance of doctoral students, especially in North African contexts. Besides, few studies have compared real email data with DCT responses to explore the link between pragmatic knowledge and actual performance.

The present study addresses those gaps by examining the request strategies and modification techniques used by second-year doctoral students (specializing in Applied Linguistics, Didactics, and Language & Communication) at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University - Sétif 2, Algeria, when communicating via email. The researchers argue that students show more awareness of language use in controlled tasks but have difficulty applying this knowledge in real email exchanges with faculty members. Second-year doctoral students represent a particularly critical population for this investigation for several reasons. First, they are at a transitional stage where they must rapidly acquire the pragmatic conventions of academic discourse to establish credibility with supervisors and faculty committees. Second, unlike advanced doctoral candidates who may have developed procedural fluency through repeated interactions, second-year students are still negotiating these norms, making the competence-performance gap more observable. Third, their recent transition from master's-level study to doctoral research intensifies their need for effective email communication regarding supervision, methodology guidance, and institutional navigation. While the participants' backgrounds in applied linguistics, language and communication, and didactics, may present heightened metalinguistic awareness that potentially make them an ideal population for examining the disconnect between declarative knowledge and procedural ability, none had received formal instruction specifically in academic email writing conventions prior to this study. This idea fits within theoretical frameworks that distinguish between declarative pragmatic knowledge (awareness of norms) and procedural pragmatic skills (the ability to use that knowledge in real-time) (Schmidt, 1992; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Using the CCSARP framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), the study compares real emails sent to faculty with WDCT responses to analyze both pragmatic performance and underlying knowledge. This comparative design helps determine whether students' awareness of pragmatics, shown in controlled tasks, carries over to their actual communication.

The study explores the following research questions:

- What request strategies do doctoral students use in genuine academic emails and WDCT responses?
- What internal and external modification techniques do students use to reduce request imposition?
- How does performance in real emails compare with WDCT responses concerning strategy choices and modifications?

By examining both real and elicited data from doctoral students at an Algerian university, this study adds empirical evidence to existing discussions about the validity of controlled tasks in pragmatics research (Golato, 2003) and the relationship between competence and performance in L2 pragmatic development. Practically, the findings offer useful insights for EAP instruction aimed at bridging the gap between students' language awareness and their ability to use pragmatically appropriate language under real communication pressures.

1–Literature Review

1–1–Pragmatic Competence in Academic Email Communication

Although scholars offer differing definitions of "pragmatic

competence," they converge on a set of fundamental principles. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), the concept is defined as the ability to use language correctly in social contexts. This competence is increasingly considered vital for effective academic communication. In email correspondence, pragmatic competence includes understanding discourse structure conventions, such as subject lines, greetings, and closings. It also involves choosing the right strategies for speech acts and using linguistic tools to reduce face-threat and show politeness (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). However, studies show that EFL learners often struggle with these pragmatic aspects, even if they have a good grasp of grammar.

Email is a unique form of communication that mixes features of written and spoken discourse (Crystal, 2006). Such a form creates specific pragmatic challenges. Unlike face-to-face conversations, email does not provide non-verbal clues. In that vein, writers must depend solely on their word choices to express tone and relationships. Moreover, since emailing is asynchronous, writers need to anticipate how recipients will interpret their messages without getting immediate feedback. This adds to the mental effort required for making pragmatic decisions (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

A critical theoretical difference lies between declarative pragmatic knowledge and procedural pragmatic competence (Schmidt, 1992). Declarative knowledge is the conscious understanding of what is appropriate in language use, what learners "know." Procedural competence, however, is about being able to use that knowledge automatically in real-time situations. This distinction is crucial for understanding the common gap between learners' performance in controlled tasks and their abilities in spontaneous communication (Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

Schmidt's (1992) framework on automatization suggests that procedural knowledge builds through repeated practice, which reduces mental strain. This process eventually allows learners to use pragmatic forms without thinking about them. However, becoming automatic requires a lot of exposure and practice in settings that resemble real use, environments that are often missing in traditional EFL teaching.

1–2–Request Strategies in the CCSARP Framework

The CCSARP offers a clear taxonomy for analyzing request strategies across different languages and cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). It classifies request head acts into three levels of directness: (1) direct strategies that specifically state the intention (imperatives, performatives, want statements); (2) conventionally indirect strategies that use standard forms for indirectness (query preparatory, suggestory formulas); and (3) non-conventionally indirect strategies that use hints requiring significant interpretation from the listener. CCSARP also differentiates between internal modifiers (syntactic and lexical devices within the request head act) and external modifiers (supportive elements that accompany the head act), offering a structured way to study pragmatic mitigation.

Research utilizing the CCSARP framework reveals differences in request strategy preferences across cultures. English speakers often prefer conventionally indirect strategies in high-imposition situations (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989). In contrast, learners from various first-language backgrounds show different patterns influenced by cultural norms, language transfer, and proficiency levels (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007). Recognizing these patterns is essential for creating effective teaching methods aimed at improving pragmatic skills.

1–3–Email Pragmatics Research on Arab EFL Learners

Studies on Arab EFL learners' email pragmatics consistently reveals clear differences from the norms of native English speakers. Deveci and Hmida (2017) argue that UAE Arab university students' email requests serve as practical examples of direct strategies for making low-imposition requests, showing a limited use of downgrades in high-imposition contexts. The study notes a significant overuse of "please" (39% compared to 14% for native speakers) and limited flexibility in how requests were expressed. Crucially, explicit email training greatly improved students' pragmatic performance, especially in aspects like subject lines, closings, and signatures.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined email requests from native and non-native English-speaking graduate students to faculty members, discovering that both groups used more direct strategies for low-imposition requests and indirect strategies for high-imposition requests. However, native speakers modified their syntax 85.5% of the time, while non-native speakers did so only 59.2% of the time. Moreover, non-native speakers relied heavily on "please"

for lexical modifications, whereas native speakers used a wider range of modifiers, including understaters, downtoners, and subjectivizers. The study concluded that non-native speakers need focused instruction on pragmatics and activities that raise awareness to improve their email communication skills.

Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) studied written requests to faculty from native and non-native English speakers, targeting the difference between positive and negative affect requests. Their findings showed non-native speakers used significantly fewer downgraders in negative affect requests (0.89 compared to 1.57 per request for native speakers). They stressed personal time needs instead of offering faculty reasonable scheduling options and showed less acknowledgment of the imposition. The study highlighted that issues with pragmatics often arise from sociopragmatic factors, not just linguistic issues.

More recently, Deveci (2023) analyzed Arabic email requests to professors from Emirati second-year university students. The study found incomplete discourse structure, only 72% included subject lines, 60% had closings, and 45% included expressions of thanks, along with limited internal modification (14% used "please," 9% had openers, and 3% used downtoners) but frequent external modification (45% included thanks and 26% provided background information). Despite being rated respectful, many emails were deemed inappropriate due to high rates of language errors (83% spelling and 81% punctuation). These results emphasize that pragmatic appropriateness involves both strategic choices and language accuracy.

1–4–Authentic Data vs. Discourse Completion Tasks

The link between pragmatic knowledge and performance is a central topic explored in interlanguage pragmatics research. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) are commonly used to gather pragmatic data because they are efficient and allow control over contextual factors (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). However, DCTs have drawn criticism for generating shorter, more formulaic responses than genuine communication and for possibly prompting awareness of politeness that might not represent actual language use (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Studies comparing DCTs with real data show that DCTs typically produce more direct strategies and fewer modifiers than natural speech acts (Golato, 2003).

Despite their drawbacks, DCTs are still useful for evaluating metalinguistic knowledge and awareness of pragmatic rules (Roever, 2011). When combined with authentic data, DCTs can be used to investigate the connection between learners' knowledge about pragmatic norms and their actual production in real situations. The aforementioned approach provides insights into whether limitations in pragmatics result from knowledge gaps or performance issues, an important distinction for teaching. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) found that Greek EFL learners made more mitigated requests in DCTs than in real emails. This suggests that the reflective nature of DCTs might prompt idealized responses that do not correspond to authentic production under time constraints and cognitive loads. The current study uses this comparative approach to explore the link between competence and performance in Algerian doctoral students' email requests, adding to our understanding of how contextual and cognitive factors affect pragmatic production.

1–5–Research Gap

While the study of email pragmatics has grown significantly, important gaps remain. First, many studies focus on undergraduates, with fewer examining doctoral students, who have unique pragmatic needs and greater experience in academic communication. Second, research on Arab EFL learners' email pragmatics is mainly concentrated in Gulf countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia), leaving North African contexts underrepresented. Third, few studies use comparative designs to analyze both authentic and elicited data, aiming to understand the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and performance. this study addresses these gaps by examining doctoral students' email requests in an Algerian university setting, using both authentic emails and DCTs. This will help provide a better understanding of how pragmatic competence develops in advanced EFL learners and clarifies the relationship between declarative knowledge and procedural skills.

1–6– Cognitive Load and L2 Pragmatic Processing

Recent advances in understanding L2 pragmatic production have increasingly emphasized the role of cognitive processing constraints. Skehan's (2009) Limited Attentional Capacity Model posits that L2 speakers must allocate cognitive resources across competing demands: conceptualizing content, formulating linguistic structures, monitoring for accuracy, and attending to sociopragmatic

appropriateness. Under high cognitive load, learners prioritize content and basic intelligibility over pragmatic refinement, defaulting to automatized forms even when declarative knowledge of more appropriate alternatives exists (Taguchi, 2007).

Working memory capacity plays a crucial role in pragmatic performance. Learners with limited available cognitive resources struggle to simultaneously process propositional content and pragmatic packaging, particularly in production tasks requiring real-time formulation (Roever, 2012). This explains why controlled tasks like DCTs, which reduce content generation demands and eliminate time pressure, often elicit more pragmatically sophisticated responses than authentic communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

The distinction between controlled and automatic processing (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977) is particularly relevant for understanding pragmatic development. While learners may possess declarative knowledge of conventionally indirect strategies, accessing and deploying these forms requires automatic processing developed through extensive practice. Without sufficient exposure and practice opportunities, learners default to simpler direct strategies that impose lower processing demands. This theoretical framework provides a lens for interpreting the competence-performance gap observed in advanced L2 users.

2–Methodology

2–1–Participants

Participants were second-year doctoral students in the Department of English at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University (Sétif 2), Algeria, drawn from three specialisations: Applied Linguistics, Didactics, and Language and Communication. The full cohort enrolled in these programmes during 2024–2025 was invited to participate through their departmental supervisor. Participation was voluntary; therefore, the final sample constituted a convenience sample drawn from a single intact cohort (census invitation with self-selection). Inclusion was restricted to students currently enrolled in a second-year doctoral programme at this institution, who used English regularly for academic email and whose linguistic background combined native Arabic with French as the dominant institutional L2. This sampling strategy is consistent with exploratory interlanguage pragmatics research, where theoretical representativeness often takes precedence over probabilistic sampling (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Its main limitation is that the findings cannot be generalized to doctoral populations at other institutions without further verification, a point discussed in Section 4.6.

In total, 16 participants provided 43 authentic emails. For the comparative analysis, one main request head act was identified in each email, yielding 43 analyzable authentic requests. Ten of these same participants also completed the WDCT, yielding 30 WDCT responses across three scenarios. The reduced WDCT subsample reflects post-hoc attrition rather than additional exclusion criteria, as six participants declined the WDCT after submitting emails, primarily because of time constraints. All participants were native speakers of Arabic, bilingual in Arabic and French, with English as a foreign language. Their ages ranged from 24 to 35 years, and all had completed at least seven years of university-level English study. None had lived for extended periods in English-speaking countries, but all reported regular use of English for academic communication. Accordingly, external validity is limited, and the findings should be generalized cautiously.

Table 1: *Participant Demographics (N = 16)*

Characteristic	Range/Distribution
Age	(years (M = 28.3, SD = 3.1 35–24
Years studying English	(years (M = 8.2, SD = 1.4 10–7
Time in English-speaking countries	(months (all participants 0
Previous email writing instruction	(participants (0% 0
L1	(Arabic (16, 100%
L2	(French (16, 100%
English proficiency level	Advanced (self-reported; CEFR C1–C2 estimated; no independent (objective measure administered

No standardized proficiency test (e.g., IELTS/TOEFL) was administered due to access and time constraints during data collection; therefore, proficiency should be interpreted as a self-reported descriptor rather than a controlled predictor variable

2–1–1–Ethical Considerations

All participants provided signed informed consent; email data were anonymized (names/dates redacted) and stored securely in accordance with the university's data-protection policy. To ensure the authenticity of email data, several verification procedures were implemented. Participants were instructed to forward emails directly from their institutional email accounts to preserve metadata where possible. Emails were examined for indicators of genuine communication, including reply threads (when available), timestamp consistency, and naturalistic language patterns that distinguish spontaneous writing from constructed responses. While we acknowledge the limitation of relying on participant self-reporting, the variability in email quality, formality, and request types across the corpus suggested authentic rather than fabricated data. Additionally, when email threads included faculty responses, these provided further evidence of genuine communication

2–2–Data Collection Instruments

The data collection phase spanned two weeks (October 14–28, 2025). Participants searched their sent folders for request emails to faculty members sent during the previous 12 months (October 2024 – October 2025). This 12-month window corresponds to participants' second doctoral year and spans a full academic cycle, maximizing ecological validity while maintaining temporal relevance. A shorter window risked insufficient email yield per participant, whereas a longer window could have included emails from prior programme stages.

Participants were asked to provide 3-5 authentic emails they had sent to faculty members (supervisors, course instructors, or administrators) in English. To ensure validity, they were instructed to choose emails that included clear requests for information, help, extensions, recommendations, or clarification. The emails were anonymized to protect both participants and recipients. All emails in the dataset contained clear request head acts that could be coded using CCSARP.

Authentic emails varied in request type and recipient status. Because the study operationalizes the competence–performance distinction, the two data sources were intentionally designed to differ in level of contextual control: authentic emails reflect procedural performance under real contextual and cognitive pressure, whereas the WDCT elicits declarative pragmatic knowledge under controlled conditions. Authentic emails therefore varied naturally in recipient type and request context, while the WDCT standardized context through three scenarios. Of the 43 emails collected, 18 (41.9%) were addressed to dissertation supervisors, 16 (37.2%) to course instructors, and 9 (20.9%) to administrative faculty. Request types included deadline extensions (n=12, 27.9%), clarification of assignment requirements (n=11, 25.6%), recommendation letters (n=8, 18.6%), meeting requests (n = 7, 16.3%), and feedback requests (n = 5, 11.6%). This natural variation contrasts with the WDCT, which presented three standardized high-to-moderate-imposition requests directed at hypothetical faculty members. Comparing these two sources is consistent with established practice in interlanguage pragmatics research (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015; Golato, 2003). Authentic emails capture procedural pragmatic ability under real communicative pressure, whereas WDCT data provide a controlled view of declarative pragmatic knowledge, with content-generation demands and time pressure largely reduced. The two instruments are therefore not treated as equivalent performance measures; rather, the comparison is designed to operationalize the theoretical distinction between declarative knowledge and procedural competence (Schmidt, 1992; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). For comparability, one main request head act was extracted from each authentic email and from each WDCT response, so cross-source analyses were conducted on equivalent analytical units.

A Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was used to elicit controlled request emails under standardized contextual conditions (Brown, 2001). The WDCT was administered via a Google Forms link and included three scenarios: (1) asking for a three-day extension on a dissertation chapter (high imposition), (2) requesting a recommendation letter from a professor (high imposition with relational complexity), and (3) seeking clarification about assignment instructions (low-to-moderate imposition). These scenarios represent the most recurrent request types in the target context and together span the

range of imposition most relevant to doctoral student–faculty communication. At the same time, a three-scenario WDCT remains a relatively narrow instrument. Strategy patterns drawn from this set cannot be taken as fully representative of how participants would approach the broader range of academic requests, such as grade appeals, access to restricted resources, or co-authorship requests. This limitation is acknowledged in Section 4.6. Future research should employ a larger WDCT battery, ideally including six to eight scenarios, to achieve more reliable coverage of the request speech-act domain (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

The scenarios were piloted with five doctoral students external to the main study. In the pilot phase, participants rated each scenario on a seven-point Likert scale for perceived degree of imposition (1 = very low imposition; 7 = very high imposition). Cronbach's alpha was .81, indicating acceptable internal consistency in participants' ratings of the scenarios' perceived imposition levels. In other words, the three scenarios elicited stable and internally coherent judgments of imposition across pilot participants. This coefficient should not be interpreted as a measure of request-strategy reliability or coding consistency; inter-rater reliability for the coding scheme is reported separately in Section 2.3 using Cohen's kappa.

Each scenario included contextual information about the situation, the relationship with the recipient, and the specific request. Participants were asked to write complete emails as if in real situations, incorporating standard email elements (subject line, greeting, body, closing, signature).

2–3–Data Analysis Procedures

All data were coded using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The unit of analysis for all descriptive and inferential comparisons was the main request head act. In practice, each authentic email and each WDCT response contributed one observation, namely the single request that performed the core illocutionary goal of the message. Thus, the comparative dataset comprised 43 authentic requests and 30 WDCT requests. Although some authentic emails contained additional request-related material, only the principal request head act in each message was retained for cross-source statistical comparison. A head act was defined as the minimal utterance capable of performing the core illocutionary goal of a request in isolation (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The primary researcher made all segmentation and coding decisions following CCSARP operational guidelines, and the second rater applied the same criteria to the reliability subsample. Using a single segmentation logic across both corpora ensured that the chi-square and t-test comparisons were conducted on analytically equivalent units. For quantitative analysis, each request was coded for:

Request strategy type: Direct (e.g., imperatives, performatives, want statements) vs. conventionally indirect (e.g., query preparatory).

Number of internal modification devices (e.g., modal verbs such as would/could, politeness markers such as please/kindly, hedges).

Number of external modification devices (e.g., grounders, preparators, gratitude, apologies).

Coding was conducted by the primary researcher in multiple passes, with ambiguous cases reviewed after a two-week interval for consistency. A detailed coding sheet was created with one row per analyzed main request head act for SPSS import. Examples:

- Direct (Authentic): "I am writing to ask you to extend the deadline."
- Conventionally Indirect (WDCT): "I was wondering if it would be possible to grant me a three-day extension."

To ensure coding reliability, a second independent coder coded 20% of the comparative dataset. This included 9 authentic requests (20% of 43, rounded) and 6 WDCT responses (20% of 30). Inter-rater reliability was strong: Cohen's kappa = 0.87 for request strategy type and 0.82 for modification devices. Disagreements were resolved through consultation with a third independent rater, whose judgments were adopted as final.

The third rater reviewed contested cases blind to the original coders' decisions, and her judgments were adopted as final. Common points of disagreement included distinguishing want statements from mood derivables when requests contained both elements, and categorizing borderline cases of internal modification (e.g., whether politeness markers functioned as modifiers or discourse markers).

2–4–Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26. Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the distribution of request strategies and the

mean number of internal and external modification devices across data sources. To examine differences between authentic emails and WDCT responses, the following inferential tests were applied:

-A chi-square test of independence to assess the association between data source and request strategy type.

- Independent-samples t-tests compared the mean number of internal and external modification devices per request head act across the two data sources. Normality was assessed with the Shapiro–Wilk test, which is appropriate for samples smaller than 50. All four distributions were consistent with normality: internal modification in authentic requests, W=.971, p=.312; internal modification in WDCT requests, W=.958, p=.268; external modification in authentic requests, W=.966, p=.341; and external modification in WDCT requests, W=.952, p=.247. Levene's test returned non-significant results for both modification types—internal: F(1,71)=0.84, p=.361; external: F(1,71)=0.62, p=.433—indicating that the homogeneity-of-variance assumption was satisfied. Because the two groups were unequal in size, Welch's t-test was also examined as a robustness check and yielded the same inferential conclusion. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

3–Results

This section presents findings based on the three research questions. Quantitative analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine request strategy distribution and modification patterns, and inferential tests were used to compare authentic emails and WDCT responses.

3–1–Request Strategy Distribution

In the 43 main requests extracted from the authentic email corpus, direct strategies accounted for 95.3% (n=41), whereas conventionally indirect strategies accounted for 4.7% (n=2). No non-conventionally indirect strategies (hints) were identified. Within the direct category, want statements were the most frequent subtype, followed by mood-derivable forms and performatives.Examples of direct strategies in authentic emails include:

"I am writing to ask you to extend the deadline for submitting the chapter." (want statement)

"Please send me your feedback on the attached draft." (imperative)

Additional examples illustrating the range of directness observed in authentic emails include:

Highly direct (minimal mitigation): "Please extend my deadline to next Monday. I need more time."

Moderately direct (some mitigation): "I am writing to kindly request a three-day extension on the chapter submission. Would it be possible to submit by Friday instead of Tuesday?"

Approaching indirect (maximum mitigation observed): "I was wondering if it might be possible to request a short extension on the dissertation chapter. I would be very grateful if you could consider granting me until Friday to complete the revisions."

These examples demonstrate that while direct strategies dominated (95.3%), the degree of mitigation through internal and external modifiers varied considerably across authentic emails.

In the 30 WDCT requests, direct strategies accounted for 86.7% (n=26), whereas conventionally indirect strategies represented 13.3% (n=4). As in the authentic corpus, non-conventionally indirect strategies were absent. Among direct strategies in the WDCT data, performatives occurred most frequently, followed by want statements and imperatives.

Table 2: *Distribution of Request Strategies*

Data Source	Direct (n, %)	Conventionally Indirect (n, %)	Total
Authentic Requests	(95.3%) 41	2 (4.7%)	43
WDCT Requests	(86.7%) 26	(13.3%) 4	30
Total	(91.8%) 67	6 (8.2%)	73

3–2–Internal and External Modification

Across the 43 authentic main requests, internal modification revealed a strong reliance on a limited set of mitigating devices. Past tense modal verbs (would, could) occurred most frequently, appearing in 59.3% of cases. The politeness marker please was used in 55.6%, while progressive aspect constructions appeared in 29.6%. The politeness marker

kindly occurred in 18.5%, and interrogative forms in 14.8%. More advanced internal modifiers, such as downtoners, hedges, and subjectivizers, were rare or absent.

External modification across the 43 authentic main requests occurred more frequently and with greater variety. Preparatory moves were present in 77.8% of cases, typically to establish rapport before the request. Expressions of appreciation or thanks appeared in 70.4%, most often after the request. Grounders accompanied 40.7% of requests, providing reasons or justifications. Imposition minimizers were relatively rare (11.1%), as were apologies (7.4%). A similar general pattern was observed in the WDCT data, although the overall level of modification was higher there. Table 3 summarizes the mean number of internal and external modification devices per request head act across both datasets.

Table 3: *Internal and External Modification*

Modification Type	Authentic Requests	WDCT Requests
Internal	M = 2.01, SD = 0.94	M = 2.86, SD = 1.07
External	M = 2.43, SD = 1.12	M = 3.21, SD = 1.19

Note. M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation. Range for internal modification: Authentic 0-4, WDCT 1-5. Range for external modification: Authentic 0-5, WDCT 1-6.

Independent-samples t-tests revealed statistically significant differences between the two data sources. WDCT responses contained a significantly higher mean number of internal modification devices, $t(57.41)=-2.79$, $p=.007$, and external modification devices, $t(67.29)=-2.92$, $p=.005$.

Cohen's d effect sizes revealed moderate to large differences between data sources. For internal modification, $d=0.85$ (95% CI [0.31, 1.38]), indicating a large effect favoring WDCT responses. For external modification, $d=0.71$(95% CI [0.18, 1.23]), representing a moderate-to-large effect. These effect sizes suggest that the differences observed are not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

3–2–1–Individual Variation in Strategy Use

While aggregate patterns revealed a strong preference for direct strategies, individual variation was notable. Among the 16 participants who provided authentic emails, 11 (68.8%) used direct strategies exclusively, while 5 (31.3%) employed at least one conventionally indirect strategy. The two participants who used conventionally indirect strategies in authentic emails (Participants 3 and 12) also demonstrated the highest modification rates (M = 4.2 internal + external modifiers per request, compared to the group mean of 2.72).

In WDCT responses, variation was less pronounced but still present. All 10 participants used predominantly direct strategies, but 6 (60%) included at least one conventionally indirect strategy across the three scenarios. Participants who used indirect strategies in WDCT were not necessarily the same individuals who did so in authentic emails, suggesting that task type rather than individual pragmatic competence may drive strategy selection.

3–3–Comparative Analysis of Authentic Requests and WDCT Requests

The comparative analysis revealed systematic differences between the two datasets. The 43 authentic requests exhibited a higher proportion of direct strategies (95.3%) than the 30 WDCT requests (86.7%). In contrast, WDCT responses demonstrated significantly higher levels of both internal and external modification, as shown in Table 3.

Differences were also observed in the distribution of direct strategy subtypes. Performatives occurred more frequently in WDCT responses, while want statements and imperatives were more common in authentic emails. Despite these differences, both datasets relied heavily on a limited set of basic mitigating devices, particularly past tense modals and politeness markers.

Table 4 summarizes the inferential statistical results addressing differences between authentic emails and WDCT responses.

Table 4: *Inferential Test Results*

Test	Statistic	Df	p-value
(Chi-square (Strategy Type	χ^2=0.8	1	37.
(t-test (Internal Modification	2.79−=	57.41	*007.
(t-test (External Modification	2.92−=	67.29	*005.

Note. p<.05. Levene's tests were non-significant for both modification measures, indicating that the homogeneity-of-variance assumption was satisfied. Because group sizes were unequal, Welch's t-test was additionally examined as a robustness check and yielded the same inferential conclusion. Cohen's d effect sizes were d = 0.85 for internal modification and d=0.71 for external modification.

4–Discussion

The present study examined how Algerian doctoral students realize pragmatic competence in academic email requests by comparing authentic emails with WDCT responses. The findings revealed clear patterns in request strategy choice and modification practices, as well as systematic differences between pragmatic awareness and actual performance. This section discusses these findings in relation to existing research and theoretical perspectives, addressing each research question in turn.

4–1–Predominance of Direct Strategies

The strong preference for direct request strategies observed in this study (95.3% of authentic requests and 86.7% of WDCT requests) is consistent with earlier research showing that Arab EFL learners tend to favor directness in academic email communication (Deveci & Hmida, 2017; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). However, the findings also extend existing literature by demonstrating a higher degree of directness among doctoral-level writers. When compared with the 75.86% directness reported among Chinese Business English learners (Li & Arumugam, 2025), the present results suggest that advanced academic status does not necessarily correspond to greater pragmatic diversification.

The findings showed a complete absence of non-conventionally indirect strategies (hints). Although hints are generally infrequent even among native speakers, particularly in high-imposition requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), their complete absence points to a restricted pragmatic repertoire. This limitation may be attributed to several factors, including limited exposure to a range of academic request forms in English, insufficient explicit instruction in pragmatic strategy types within EFL curricula, potential L1 pragmatic transfer where directness is socially acceptable, and cognitive constraints that make indirect formulations more demanding for L2 users.

4–2–The Authentic-WDCT Directness Paradox

One of the most interesting findings is that authentic emails showed more directness than WDCT responses, which contrasts with the typical trend in pragmatics research where controlled tasks produce more direct responses than real interactions (Golato, 2003; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). Figure 1 shows this surprising relationship.

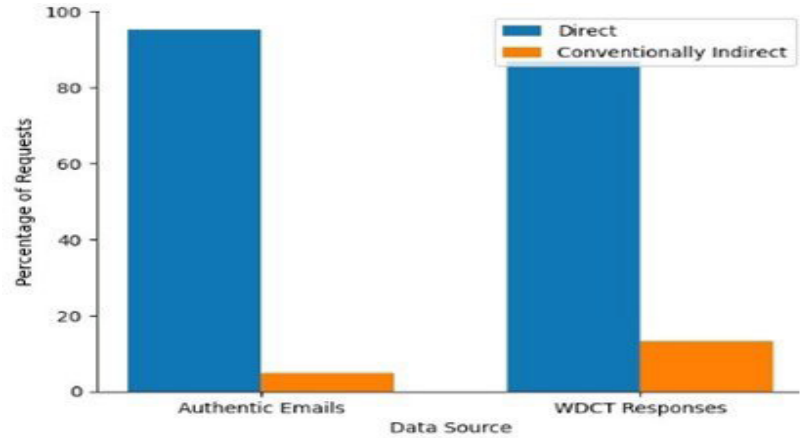

Figure1: *Distribution of Request Strategy Types Across Data Sources*

4–2–1–Cognitive Processing Constraints

One explanation relates to cognitive processing demands. According to Schmidt's (1992) theory on automatization, effective L2 production requires that language forms be automated enough to be used quickly during real-time processing. When writing authentic emails, doctoral students face various cognitive challenges: generating content, encoding language, organizing ideas, and adjusting their tone. Under these circumstances, learners tend to favor less demanding direct strategies that need fewer cognitive resources. WDCTs, on the other hand, lower cognitive demands by providing the necessary context, eliminating the need for content generation, and allowing unlimited time for writing. This ease reduces pressure and helps students access their declarative knowledge of pragmatics. The greater occurrence of performatives in WDCT (46.7% vs. 18.5% authentic) supports this idea. Performatives like "I am writing to request…" are clear and formulaic phrases that come to mind easily in reflective situations but might not be easily used in spontaneous writing. This finding backs up Taguchi and Roever's (2017) distinction between pragmatic knowledge (what students know about using language) and pragmatic ability (what they can produce in real situations). The data suggests students understand formal email conventions but struggle to apply this knowledge in spontaneous interactions.

4–2–2–Contextual and Functional Pressures

Another explanation focuses on the context. Authentic academic emails have real communicative purposes with genuine effects. Students may see efficiency as crucial in actual communications with faculty, especially when asking for basic information or help. Direct strategies effectively meet their communication needs without the unnecessary complexity of typical indirectness. Additionally, established relationships between doctoral students and faculty may lessen the perceived face-threat. Ongoing email exchanges with supervisors might lead students to believe direct requests are acceptable in low- to moderate-imposition situations. This contrasts with WDCT contexts that frame requests as potentially face-threatening, prompting greater awareness of politeness.

4–2–3–L1 and L2 Transfer Effects

The preference for directness may also reflect pragmatic transfer from participants' L1 (Arabic) and L2 (French). Research on Arabic request strategies indicates that Arabic speakers often employ more direct formulations than English speakers, particularly in situations where the requester and requestee share institutional affiliation (Al-Ali & Alawneh, 2010). In Algerian academic contexts, where French serves as the primary language of higher education, French pragmatic norms may further influence English email production. French academic correspondence tends toward greater formality through lexical choice and titles rather than syntactic indirectness (Béal, 2010), potentially explaining participants' reliance on external modifiers (preparators, expressions of gratitude) over internal syntactic mitigation.

Moreover, in Algerian universities, hierarchical relationships between students and faculty members are explicitly marked through address forms and formulaic expressions of respect, but request formulation itself may favor directness paired with appropriate framing. This cultural-linguistic pattern, combining direct request strategies with extensive external modification, precisely mirrors the pattern observed in the current data. Future research should systematically investigate Arabic and French request norms in academic email contexts to disentangle L1/L2 transfer effects from universal processing constraints.

4–3–Limited Modification Repertoire

The heavy use of "please" (55.6% of authentic emails) and past tense modals (59.3%) for internal softening, along with the limited use of downtoners, hedges, and subjectivizers, mirrors findings from earlier studies of Arab EFL learners (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Deveci & Hmida, 2017). Research on native speakers shows a much broader range of modifications, including syntactic softening through embedding (54.8% in Biesenbach-Lucas's study) and various lexical devices. The limited range in participants likely reflects both their experience and the instruction they received. If students have had little exposure to diverse modification strategies in academic emails and if their writing courses do not provide explicit instruction on email pragmatics, they will naturally depend on the few modifications they have learned. "Please" and modal verbs like "would" and "could" are commonly taught in general English classes, making them easier to recall. More advanced phrases like downtoners ("possibly," "perhaps"), hedges ("I wonder if"), and subjectivizers

("It would be appreciated if") may not be in students' active language use. Interestingly, external modification was more frequent and varied than internal modification, with high rates of preparators (77.8%) and appreciation (70.4%). These results indicate that students understand the importance of framing and building relationships but lack the language skills for complex internal softening. The prevalence of external modification aligns with Deveci's findings (2023) and shows cultural communication patterns that emphasize rapport-building through greetings and expressions of gratitude. While external modification is useful, the norms for academic emails in native English contexts usually combine external elements with more intricate internal softening, creating layers of politeness. The pattern of having rich external but limited internal modification suggests a pragmatic profile that is polite in intention but may not fully meet target norms.

4–4–Theoretical Implications for Pragmatic Development

The study's findings underscore significant implications for reshaping the understanding of L2 pragmatic development. First, they challenge the idea that pragmatic concepts awareness automatically leads to good performance when linguistic skills are adequate. The participants, despite being advanced doctoral students with seven years of university-level English study, showed a clear gap between their knowledge (shown in their awareness during WDCT) and their actual writing (seen in the directness of authentic emails). This supports models that differentiate between declarative and procedural knowledge in pragmatics (Schmidt, 1992) and suggests that pragmatic growth requires not just awareness but also extensive practice in conditions that encourage automation. Teaching conventional indirect strategies in isolated exercises may develop declarative knowledge but not the procedural skills needed for real-world communication. Second, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions about the effectiveness of controlled elicitation methods in pragmatics research. While WDCTs are useful for measuring metalinguistic awareness, these results reveal that they cannot act as substitutes for real pragmatic performance. The notable differences between WDCT and authentic responses highlight the need to gather information from various sources in pragmatics research and evaluation. Finally, the results emphasize the role of cognitive factors in producing pragmatic language. Pragmatic ability is more than mere social language knowledge. It involves complex interactions between linguistic tools, processing capabilities, contextual influences, and communication pressures. Future studies should incorporate cognitive viewpoints more explicitly into models of pragmatic development.

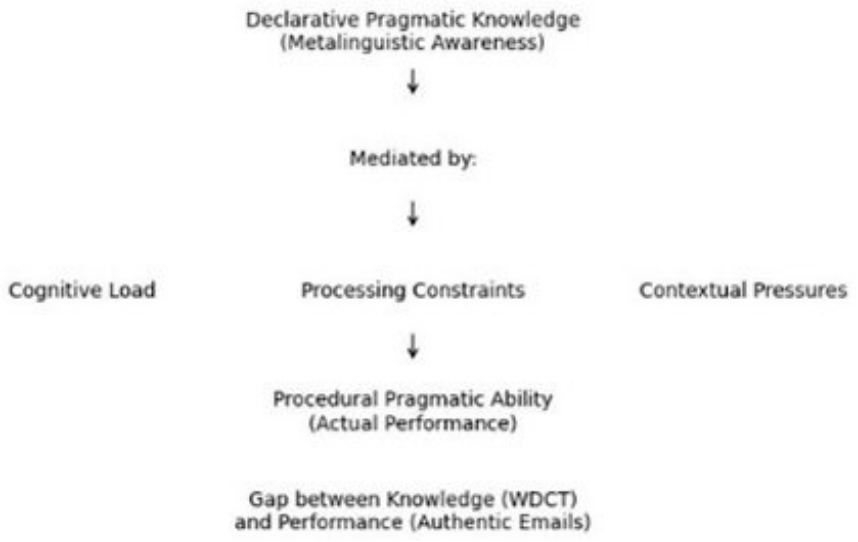

Figure 2: *Competence-Performance Gap Framework*

Figure 2. Conceptual framework illustrating the competence–performance gap in L2 pragmatic production, showing how cognitive and contextual constraints hinder the transfer of declarative pragmatic knowledge into procedural ability.

4–5–Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several evidence-based pedagogical interventions for EAP contexts. First, explicit instruction in

request strategy type particularly conventionally indirect forms (query preparatory: "Would it be possible to...?", "I was wondering if...") is essential but insufficient. The data shows that students may understand these forms conceptually (as evidenced by their appearance in WDCT responses) but fail to position them automatically in authentic communication.

Second, pedagogy must prioritize automatization through high-volume, time-pressured practice that simulates authentic email writing conditions. Activities might include: (a) rapid response tasks where students compose email requests within 5-10 minute time limits; (b) serial email exchanges with graduated complexity, building procedural fluency through repetition; and (c) email revision tasks where students first write under time pressure, then revise with explicit attention to pragmatic features, making the distinction between knowledge and performance visible.

Third, the heavy reliance on basic internal modifiers ("please," past tense modals) alongside near-absence of advanced devices (downtoners, hedges, subjectivizers) indicates a clear instructional target. Teachers should provide focused input on diversifying mitigation strategies, potentially through analysis of faculty members' own email requests to students (modeling native or expert norms). Explicit comparison of modification types with guided practice in each category is also a suggested input, along with noticing activities where students identify and categorize modifiers in authentic academic emails.

Fourth, the strong use of external modification (preparators, expressions of gratitude) suggests students understand relationship management principles but lack linguistic tools for internal mitigation. Instruction should build on this existing strength by showing how external and internal modification work in native-speaker norms.

Finally, assessment practices should incorporate both controlled tasks (to measure declarative knowledge) and portfolio-based evaluation of authentic emails students send to faculty (to measure procedural ability). This dual assessment approach aligns with the competence-performance distinction demonstrated in the current findings and provides actionable feedback targeting the specific gap between what students know and what they produce.

4–6–Limitations and Future Research Directions

Sixteen participants provided authentic email data, whereas only ten of these same participants completed the WDCT. This imbalance resulted from post-hoc attrition after email submission, as six participants cited time constraints. At the participant level, this asymmetry limits comparability between the two datasets. At the analytical level, the comparative dataset comprised 43 authentic requests and 30 WDCT requests, and this unequal distribution reduces statistical power for between-source comparisons. The chi-square test of independence operated with limited power (approximately 47% at $\alpha = .05$ for a medium effect size, estimated via G*Power 3.1), which increases the risk of Type II error. Accordingly, comparisons across the two data sources should be interpreted cautiously, and replication with larger, more balanced samples remains a priority. Because the study focuses on a single institution in Algeria, its findings cannot be generalized to other North African or Arab contexts without further replication. Future research should therefore employ multi-institutional and longitudinal designs to test the stability of the patterns observed here.

The measurement of English proficiency warrants explicit caution. Participants self-reported their English level rather than completing a validated instrument — IELTS, TOEFL, or an institutional placement test — leaving the data vulnerable to social desirability bias and potentially misaligned with productive pragmatic ability (Dörnyei, 2007). An objective proficiency measure in future work would enable between-group comparisons and allow direct testing of whether proficiency level moderates the competence–performance gap observed here.

Second, all 43 authentic emails were fully coded by the primary researcher, but the comparative statistical analysis was conducted on the 43 main requests extracted from those emails. A second rater (independent PhD colleague) coded 20% of the comparative dataset (9 authentic requests and 6 WDCT responses), yielding Cohen's kappa = 0.87 for strategy type and 0.82 for modifications, indicating strong inter-rater reliability. Third, the study does not have long-term data to track pragmatic development over time. Fourth, process data that could clarify the cognitive aspects behind authentic email writing were not collected. Finally, the study did not examine faculty views on students' emails.

Future research should include longitudinal studies on

pragmatic development throughout doctoral programs, intervention studies testing explicit pragmatic instruction with focused practice, cross-cultural comparisons to see if patterns apply in other Arab contexts, exploration of L1 transfer effects through contrastive analysis, studies on faculty perceptions of student emails, process-oriented research using think-aloud methods or keystroke logging, and examination of other speech acts to find whether pragmatic limitations are unique to requests or reflect broader issues.

Conclusion

The present paper examined Algerian doctoral students' pragmatic competence in academic email requests by comparing authentic emails with controlled task responses within the three WDCT scenarios. The study reveals a significant competence-performance gap that challenges fundamental assumptions about pragmatic development. Data shows that students demonstrated overwhelming reliance on direct request strategies and basic modifiers like "please" and modal verbs in authentic emails, with sophisticated mitigating devices largely absent, while their controlled task responses showed substantially greater appropriateness and strategic diversity. This disconnect indicates that students possess declarative knowledge of appropriate pragmatic forms but struggle to apply this awareness under the cognitive and contextual pressures of real-time communication, suggesting that metalinguistic awareness and advanced language proficiency do not automatically translate to effective pragmatic performance. The findings carry critical implications for both pedagogy and research: they underscore the inadequacy of instruction focused solely on raising awareness, calling instead for intensive, contextualized practice designed to automate appropriate strategies through time-pressured tasks, repeated practice to reduce cognitive load, corpus-based exposure to native norms, and authentic assessment methods beyond controlled elicitation. The study also questions the validity of relying exclusively on discourse completion tasks in pragmatics research, advocating for multi-method approaches that capture the complexity of authentic performance. For doctoral students navigating English-medium academic environments, insufficient pragmatic support risks damaging supervisory relationships, limiting professional opportunities, and hindering integration into international scholarly communities. Future research should investigate the cognitive mechanisms underlying this competence-performance divide, evaluate targeted interventions that bridge the gap between knowledge and fluent use, and examine L1 transfer effects on English academic email production. Additionally, incorporating faculty perspectives on email appropriateness would enable development of evidence-based pedagogical strategies that support non-native doctoral students in achieving full, appropriate participation in high-stakes academic discourse

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الفجوة بين الكفاءة والأداء في طلبات البريد الإلكتروني الأكاديمية: أدلة مستمدة من طلاب الدكتوراه الجزائريين

ملخص

تستقصي هذه الدراسة الكفاءة التداولية لدى طلبة الدكتوراه في السنة الثانية بجامعة محمد لمين دباغين – سطيف 2، الجزائر، مع التركيز على إنجاز استراتيجيات الطلب في رسائل البريد الإلكتروني الأكاديمية. وبالاعتماد على إطار مشروع الإنجاز التداولي للأفعال الكلامية عبر الثقافات (CCSARP)، تقارن الدراسة بين 43 رسالة إلكترونية أصيلة أُرسلت إلى أعضاء هيئة التدريس و30 استجابة لمهمة إتمام خطاب كتابي (WDCT). وقد كشف التحليل الكمي عن اعتماد طاغٍ على استراتيجيات الطلب المباشر، إذ مثّلت ٪95.3 من أصل 43 طلبًا أصيلاً و٪86.7 من أصل 30 طلبًا في الـ WDCT. وقد برزت «مفارقة المباشرة» بشكل لافت، حيث أظهر الطلبة مستويات أعلى من المباشرة في التواصل الأصيل مقارنة بالمهام المضبوطة. علاوة على ذلك، تضمّنت استجابات الـ WDCT عددًا أكبر بشكل دال من وسائل التعديل الداخلية والخارجية مقارنة برسائل البريد الإلكتروني الواقعية. وتشير هذه النتائج إلى وجود فجوة ملحوظة بين الكفاءة والأداء، إذ يمتلك متعلمو الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المستويات المتقدمة معرفة تصريحية بالمعايير التداولية، لكنهم يواجهون صعوبة في تطبيقها تحت الضغوط المعرفية والسياقية للتواصل في الزمن الحقيقي. كما تشكك النتائج في صلاحية الاعتماد على البيانات الاستثارية وحدها، وتؤكد الحاجة إلى تدخلات بيداغوجية تُعلي من أولوية أتمتة الروتينات التداولية. وتقدم هذه الدراسة رؤى مهمة لتدريس الإنجليزية لأغراض أكاديمية (EAP)، من خلال الدعوة إلى تدريب مكثف وعالي التواتر ومقيّد زمنيًا لردم الفجوة بين الوعي التداولي لدى المتعلمين وقدرتهم الإجرائية في البيئات الأكاديمية عالية المخاطر.

الكلمات المفتاحية
البريد الإلكتروني الأكاديمي
نموذج CCSARP
الكفاءة البراغماتية
استراتيجيات الطلب

L'écart entre compétences et performances dans les demandes académiques par e-mail : données provenant d'étudiants doctorants algériens

Résumé

Cette étude examine la compétence pragmatique des doctorants de deuxième année à l'Université Mohamed Lamine Debaghine – Sétif 2, en Algérie, en mettant l'accent sur la réalisation des stratégies de requête dans les courriels académiques. En s'appuyant sur le cadre du Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), la recherche compare 43 courriels authentiques envoyés à des membres du corps enseignant à 30 réponses produites dans le cadre d'une Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). L'analyse quantitative a révélé une dépendance écrasante à l'égard des stratégies de requête directes, qui représentaient 95,3 % des 43 requêtes authentiques et 86,7 % des 30 requêtes issues du WDCT. Un important « paradoxe de la directité » est apparu : les étudiants ont manifesté des niveaux de directité plus élevés dans la communication authentique que dans les tâches contrôlées. En outre, les réponses au WDCT contenaient significativement davantage de procédés de modification internes et externes que les courriels réels. Ces résultats suggèrent l'existence d'un écart notable entre compétence et performance, dans la mesure où des apprenants avancés de l'anglais langue étrangère possèdent une connaissance déclarative des normes pragmatiques, mais peinent à l'appliquer sous les pressions cognitives et contextuelles de la communication en temps réel. Les résultats remettent en question la validité d'un recours exclusif aux données sollicitées et soulignent la nécessité d'interventions pédagogiques qui accordent la priorité à l'automatisation des routines pragmatiques. Cette recherche apporte des éclairages importants pour l'enseignement de l'anglais à visée académique (EAP), en plaidant pour une pratique intensive, fréquente et soumise à une contrainte temporelle, afin de combler l'écart entre la conscience pragmatique des apprenants et leur capacité procédurale dans des environnements académiques à forts enjeux.

Mots clés
Courriel universitaire
CCSARP
compétence pragmatique
stratégies de demande

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests

تضارب المصالح

يعلن المؤلف (المؤلفون) لا تضارب في المصالح

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